

# A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Advertisements from High-Context Cultures and Low-Context Cultures

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## Abstract

With the development of economy and the change of social culture, advertisements have penetrated our life slowly and done a lot to the commercial markets. Advertisements have often been analyzed in a stylistic way for its unique language style. But language is an important part, as well as a carrier, of culture. Advertising language, as other kinds of languages, is also a significant component of culture and is a comprehensive collection of different aspects of culture. In turn, it reflects culture in its own way. A cultural pattern, put forward by Edward T. Hall and called “high context” and “low context” communication, will be focused on to analyze different advertisements from these two cultures.

**Keywords:** a cross-cultural analysis, advertisements, high-context and low-context cultures

## 1. Introduction

With the development of economy and the change of social culture, people’s purchasing demands become increasingly higher and higher. As a result, in order to arouse customers’ purchasing desires, the commercial traders resort to the advertisements, which become more and more popular and become an integral part of our daily life. They appear almost everywhere, on the street, on the television, on the radio, in the newspapers and magazines, on the Internet, and on any places that you can imagine. They have penetrated our life silently and done great contribution to the commercial markets. As they are playing a vital role in society and everyone is familiar with them, it is necessary to analyze them in a detailed way.

It is well-known that advertisements are often analyzed in a stylistic way for its unique language style. It is high time that an analysis from the cultural perspective was demonstrated which is different from the stylistic way and helps to obtain some new perceptions. Language is an important part of culture and a carrier of culture. Advertising language, as other kinds of languages, is also a significant component of culture and is a comprehensive collection of different aspects of culture, such as religious beliefs, values, history and so on. However, because of its unique language style, advertising language can reflect culture where it belongs in its own way.

It is apparent that there exist different cultural patterns from different cultures. In consequence, what the same advertisements manifest in different cultures will be totally different and in order to appeal customers within different cultures, the advertisements should know what the target culture is, and how it relates to people’s life.

A cultural pattern put forward by Edward T. Hall and called “high context” and “low context” communication will be focused on to analyze different advertisements from these two cultures. It will make a clear understanding of how these two cultures manifested in advertisements help people get the information of what the advertisements want to show easily as a result to achieve the advertising effects.

## 2. Definition of High Context and Low Context

First of all, it is of great help to define the concepts of high context and low context clearly. In the book, *Beyond Culture*, Edward T. Hall, who is an American anthropologist and the founding father of intercultural communication (Hall, 1976) raised the concepts of high context and low context. He defined “a high context (HC) communication is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code”.

In Edward T. Hall's view, a high-context (HC) culture is one in which people are deeply involved with each other. Due to the intimate relationship among people, a structure of social hierarchy exists, and individual inner emotions are kept under strong self-control. As a result, information is widely shared through simple messages with deep meaning, (Hall, 1976). The communication style is more implicit and indirect. In a low-context (LC) culture people are highly individualized, and there is relatively little involvement with others, resulting in the very little social hierarchy or society imposing on the individuals' lives (Hall, 1976). The communication between people is more explicit, direct and non-personal.

From the definitions, it is apparent that high-context culture and low-context culture are opposite. In order to distinguish these two cultures, Hall (1990) proposed a set of parameters to help situate cultures along a cultural arrangement from high-context to low-context dimensions (Figure).



Figure 1. *Understanding cultural differences*. Hall, E. and M. Hall (1990)

In the above figure, Hall stated that all cultures can be situated according to different communicating styles (Hall, 1990). In some cultures, such as German, Scandinavian, North American and French, communication in these cultures occurs mainly through explicitly expressed message, and thus they are categorized as low-context culture. While in other cultures, such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean and African American, communication is through indirect and implicit information such as gestures, inferences and even silence instead of the directly uttering words which contains most of the information.

### 3. Characteristics of High-context Culture and Low-context Culture

Hall maintains that although all cultures contain both characteristics of high-context and low-context, most can be placed along a scale showing their ranking on this particular continuum (seen in Figure 1). And within each culture, one orientation seems to dominate. Comparisons between high-context and low-context will be made to further analyze different features of high-context and low-context culture.

#### 3.1 Denotation & Connotation

In a high-context culture people tend to be connotative, in other words, most of the information is not expressed directly through words, their facial expressions, actions, body movements are all of great importance to get the whole meaning of their utterances. While people from low-context culture are more denotative, in most situations, they will speak out their opinions, needs and feelings in a straight way. An American proverb says "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." This U.S. positive attitude towards the direct expression of emotion is very different from China. One Chinese proverb states that "A harsh word dropped from the tongue cannot be brought back by a coach and six horses." The aim of this Chinese proverb is to warn people be careful with their words.

#### 3.2 Confrontation

Man, like other animals, is sometimes aggressive, but, unlike other species, he handles and channels aggression in many different ways, depending upon his culture and how it structures and integrates aggression (Hall, 1976). In high-context culture, people tend to personalize their disagreement with others. To show one's disagreement and anger in public is tantamount to admitting loss of control and face, because what is being said is taken

personally which may have an influence on interpersonal relationships. Therefore, they will keep their emotions inside or just remain silence to avoid trouble. In this way, they can maintain social harmony and intimate bonds with each other. In the eyes of people from low-context culture, this kind of repression is totally unreasonable. Everyone has their own rights to express opinions, and this explicit criticism has nothing to do with their interpersonal relationships. It is reported (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987) that in LC culture solution orientation is more often used to resolve conflicts, whereas in HC culture non-confrontation is more often used.

### *3.3 Interpersonal Relationship*

Since collectivism is a typical feature of high-context culture, people from high-context countries are deeply involved with one another. In a high-context culture, the whole system of interpersonal relationship is a network in which anyone can be connected to another in some way. The bonds between people are relatively stable and last for a long time. That is why Chinese people always cherish the friendship which can last for a lifetime. And in such society, things get done by relationships with people. They can count on their in-groups to look after them. High-context cultures make greater distinction between insiders and outsiders than low-context cultures do (Hall, 1976). In a low-context culture, the relationship between people is much more flexible, it begins and ends quickly. People belong to different groups simultaneously and there is a vague demarcation line between two different groups. They like to follow specific rules to get things done instead of depending on the relationships between people.

### *3.4 Communication*

The intimate human relationships and the well-structured social hierarchy and norms in high-context cultures serve as a broad context in which human communication takes place. In high-context cultures, message is less transmitted through verbal codes such as words, sentences and grammar, while those nonverbal elements—voice tone, facial expressions, gestures, and eye movements should also be taken into consideration. Communication in high-context is seen as an art form—a way of engaging someone. People focus on relationship-building as well as information-exchanging. While in low-context culture, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code, that is, in form of words, sentences, and grammar (Hall, 1976). Communication in low-context is seen as a way of exchanging information, that is to say, it is what is said that matters, but not how it is said and not the environment within which it is said.

### *3.5 Concept of Time*

Hall (1976) noticed that the perception of time is culture-specific. He identified cultures belonging to either end of the continuum as being either polychromic or monochromic, where high-context cultures are polychromic and low-context cultures are monochromic. In high-context culture, people treat time as a constitution of points. During a certain period, they can do several things simultaneously, so they have been used to tackling something in the process of other activities. The result is which matters most, whether they are concentrated or not in the process is not taken into consideration as long as the result is satisfactory. On the contrary, things run in a completely adverse way in low-context culture. People treat time as a straight line. One can concentrate only on one thing during a period of time. They are inclined to make detailed schedules about what they are going to do; efficiency is the most significant to them.

After the above analysis of the characteristics of high-context and low-context culture, we can come to the conclusion that high-context culture is more indirect, ambiguous, maintaining of harmony, reserved and polychromic. In contrast, low-context culture was identified as direct, precise, based on true intentions, open and monochromic. All these differences have an impact on the way in which the advertiser chooses to promote products and the inferential behavior of the audience from different cultural backgrounds. So the study about high-context and low-context culture beforehand is quite necessary to understand advertisements in different cultures.

## **4. Advertisements in High-Context and Low-Context Communication**

As far as we know, different cultural environments cover languages with different cultural meanings. Advertising communication is the activity that the advertiser wants to show the products or service to the target audience through advertising language and pictures or videos which convey some useful information about that product or service. However, if the advertiser and the audience belong to different contextual cultures, in order to achieve the advertising effects, the main focus should be on the target audience and the advertiser should get to know some information about that culture and make the advertisements easily perceived by the audience.

The context of culture affects advertising language and has constraints on the expressions of advertising language. At the same time, advertising language can reflect the context of culture. Considering the differences

between high-context communication and low-context communication, different advertisements will be demonstrated in each context. According to the different communicating styles in high-context and low-context cultures, some advertisements will be analyzed and compared.

The first pair of advertisements is from the Crest toothpaste. They are advertised in the following way:

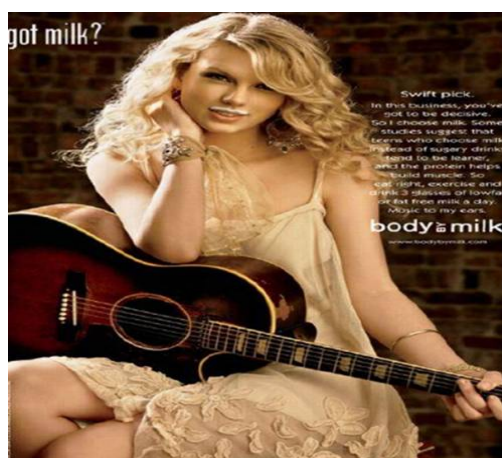
The first advertisement: Now there is something more dentists can recommend for your gums that's proven to help get them healthier. Crest Plus Gum is the only cavity fighting toothpaste that's so effective, and it's clinically proven to help reserve the gum disease-gingivitis. Just what the dentists ordered.

The second advertisement: Behind that healthy smile, there's a Crest kid.

From the first advertisement, we can clearly obtain all the information about the product. The English advertisement uses concise words to describe this product. At first, we know this is an advertisement for Crest toothpaste, and then we know the function of the product: to help your gums to become healthier, reserve the gum disease-gingivitis and the word "only" in the advertisement can show its unique function—fighting cavity. What's more, the last sentence tells the audience that the dentists, the authority of this product, just ordered this kind of toothpaste. From all the information above, it is clear that this advertisement is exhibited in the low-context cultures for its direct and explicit expressed message about the product. People in that culture can easily understand this form of advertisement. However, if this advertisement is presented in a high-context culture, such as China, people in this culture already have some previous existed assumptions that the product is good and will be healthy for the teeth and they do not like to do what the dentists ordered and some expressions of this advertisement will make them feel not comfortable and not decide to buy this product.

The second advertisement is much vague compared to the first one. In the second one, we can just get the information such as healthy smile, and a Crest kid. Beyond this, nothing is expressed in it. From the indirect and implicit message presented to the audience, it can be concluded that this one is typically a mode of the high-context culture. Thus, this advertisement should be interpreted from contextual perspective and taken into account the cultural factors, such as beliefs and values. For instance, if this advertisement is interpreted by the Chinese, as audience from high-context culture, they can perceive this advertisement in a very cohesive and concise way, and as a result, the effects of this advertisement will be achieved. The Chinese will perceive the advertisement in this way: in China, we often say that everything should begin from the kids and people in China care about the kids with exhausted efforts. Under such pre-existed contextual assumption, it is evident that it is better to start brushing teeth from the kids which will make them have healthy smile. Without describing the function and quality of this product directly, the audience has already obtained the main function of this product and the contextual effects will be inferred. However, if this advertisement is interpreted by the audience from the low-context culture, they will be confused by the little and vague information in it and they will not have the desire to buy this product.

From all above, it is obvious that different advertising language will have different effects in high-context culture and low-context one. Some advertisements are presented with a blending of pictures and written words. The following two pictures are two advertisements from high-context culture and low-context culture. Let's see how they are different from each other.



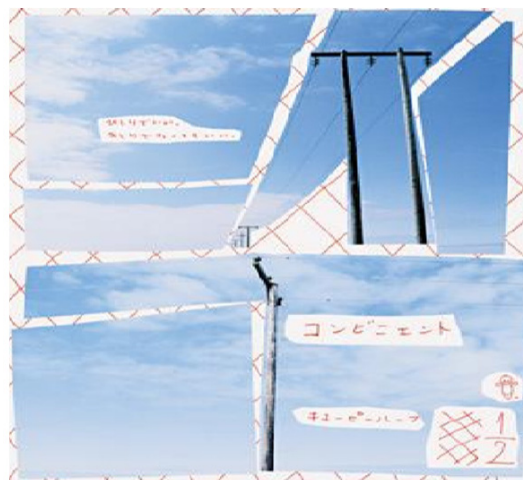
Picture 1. An Advertisement for milk

Picture 1 is a milk advertisement in the United States, it is a very famous milk brand created by California Milk Processor Board. From the country mentioned and the explicit way the picture is presented, we can see that this advertisement belongs to low-context communication which uses direct and informative message to convey its meaning.

From the picture, we can clearly see the famous singer Taylor Swift with a milk mustache, and the slogan *Got milk?* will attract the audience's attention immediately and remind the audience that this is a poster of the advertisement for milk.

On the picture there is a section of written words in the utterance of Taylor Swift. Taylor Swift said to the audience: *"In this business, you've got to be decisive. So I choose milk. Some teens who choose milk instead of sugary drinks, and the protein helps build muscle. So eat right, exercise and drink 3 glasses of low fat or fat free milk a day. Music to my ears"*.

In this paragraph, Taylor Swift used the first personal noun "I" instead of "we", which manifests the individualism in low-context culture. Low-context culture tends to be individualistic, where emphasis is put on the goals and accomplishments of the individual rather than the group. Individuals are expected to become independent of others and look after themselves. Personal values are more important than collective values. The "I" consciousness prevails in this culture. In this advertisement, the use of "I" will make audience from the low-context more comfortable because they are more familiar with this individualistic way of communication. Moreover, in this advertisement, Taylor Swift recommends the teenagers to eat right, exercise and drink 3 glasses of low fat or fat free milk a day which will make them strong and its protein will help them build muscle. In her recommendations, the function and quality of this product is already endowed. However, if this picture is demonstrated in a high-context culture, the effect will be different. For instance, if it is advertised in China in this way, most of Chinese parents will not choose it. Due to the collectivism culture they share, they will be more familiar with the product if it is welcomed by everyone, and the image of the sexy and beautiful woman will not be accepted for their connotative culture.



Picture 2. An Advertisement for salad

Picture 2 is a Japanese advertisement for a salad which contains a half less fat than usual. As we have mentioned earlier, Japanese culture is on the top of high-context cultures. The characteristics in this culture can be evidently shown to the audience.

In this advertisement, Picture 2 contains two sentences, from the top to the below they are "Whether or not I am fine by myself" and "Convenience". Just from these words, it is difficult to interpret the meaning of this advertisement. Most of the message is included in the picture instead of words. We can see that Picture 2 is consisted with two small pictures. In the top picture, we can see a big wire pole with two pillars, and then we find a small pole in the faraway place just with one pillar, but they can all serve the same function—holding the wire. Therefore, the small pole in the faraway place said in a personalized way: "Whether or not, I am fine by myself." The picture below is just the faraway small picture in a magnified effect, which said: "Convenience." Because the wire pole with one pillar can serve the same function with the wire pole with two pillars, the

reduction of one pillar makes it more convenient. Then the appearance of the second picture will make the theme of this advertisement become explicit and definite. Compared to other kind of salad, this one's fat and calorie is reduced by 50%, which will be healthier and meanwhile the taste remains the same as before.

The characteristic of this advertisement is that it conveys ambiguous message with very little information about the product. The audience should try their best to associate these two pictures together and perceive the implied meaning of this advertisement. If this advertisement is presented in a low-context culture, the ambiguous meaning will make the audience perplexed.

## **5. Causes of the Differences Embodied in Advertisements**

There are many factors that are responsible for the differences embodied in advertisements. They mainly include different histories and thinking modes between high-context culture and low-context culture. China and America as the most typical countries representing high-context culture and low-context culture will be analyzed thoroughly.

### *5.1 Historical Aspect and Cultural Values*

China and America have different historical backgrounds and they follow diverse developmental paths. For a long period of time, China has been isolated from the rest of the world. People were interdependent to resist the outside invasion and deal with daily affairs. Therefore, they have a preference for virtues related to loyalty to the group and cooperation. As for America, it is a rather new country compared to the China's five-thousand-year history. When the country was first built, it was only a country with thirteen states built by Puritans who desired their freedom, and many lands were still undiscovered. Take the Westward Movement as an example. It required courage and pioneer spirit to conquer the unknown world. Thus, Americans greatly value liberty in human rights and efficiency in the use of time, but lack formality and cooperation.

Because of differences in historical culture, China and America have different views on individualism and collectivism. Throughout most of Chinese history, Confucianism held the essential position in the formation of social ideology. Confucianism is a system of all-round and multidimensional cultural complex. It should be interpreted with the development of the times. Confucianism believes that one should immerse into the society to exist. And only through the society can one achieve his values of existence. Consequently, due to the emphasis on cooperation and group concepts in Chinese tradition, collectivism is gradually taken shape in Chinese culture. Adversely, grown up in a country who never gives up chasing the American Dream, Americans see themselves as separate human beings who have their own opinions and who are responsible for their own decisions. People's work and value become more important than that in other countries in terms of individual wisdom and effort. That's how individualism becomes the dominant feature of America.

### *5.2 Thinking Models*

According to Choe (2001), low-context cultures tend to emphasize logic and rationality, based on the belief that there is always an objective truth that can be reached through linear processes of discovery. High-context cultures, on the other hand, believe that truth will manifest itself through non-linear discovery processes and without having to employ rationality. Once a national mode of thinking comes into being, it will transform into the nation's thinking tendency, which will reflect in people's daily activities and how they perceive the world around them. Generally speaking, western people have a linear way of thinking and they are good at analyzing and reasoning, while Chinese people have a spiral way of thinking and they are good at imagining and intuiting. Take one aspect as an example, according to Taoism, everything in the universe exists with the opposing element, which is a dynamic balanced system. We cannot speak of one thing without the consideration of the other one. As a result, integrative thinking is the most fundamental characteristic of Chinese culture. On the contrary, Western thinking model is based on individuality, so they are more likely to consider things respectively. This difference can also be seen from the different treatments between Traditional Chinese Medicine and Western Medicine.

## **6. Conclusion**

Nowadays, advertisements have been an indispensable part of our daily life, and they reflect radical changes in technology, media, social and economic relations, but the most essential factor to explain those differences manifested in advertisements is still culture. Based on the high/low-context model proposed by Edward T. Hall, a new study of advertisements from the cultural perspective is surely helpful for us to understand advertisements from different cultures. Through the contrastive study of advertisements from high-context and low-context culture, we can have a better understanding of their distinctive features. But it should also be pointed out that 'high' or 'low' are just general terms to describe a certain culture, and every society contains both modes and

every individual uses both high-context and low-context communication skills in conversation. We should see these differences as a continuum, and keep in mind that they are just a matter of degrees. It's more appropriate to use these terms to describe and understand particular situations and environments.

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